

## Union Democracy Revisited: Decision-Making Procedures in the Italian Labour Movement

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This article critically discusses a time-honoured thesis in the social science literature, that membership control over union policy may be undesirable due to its potentially adverse effects on third parties and/or society as a whole. Based on extensive field research in Italy, the article first analyses the issue in general terms and then illustrates empirically two scenarios in which the presence of democratic decision-making procedures (that is, procedures which both involve the rank and file workers and give them ultimate decision-making power) is not only compatible but even conducive to 'responsible' union behaviour while their absence leads to opposite outcomes. The two empirical illustrations examine the trajectory of centralized bargaining in Italy between the 1980s and 1990s and the tradeoffs facing the employees of two matched-paired factories in the Mezzogiorno, respectively.

*Keywords:* deliberation, Italy, union behaviour, union cooperation, union democracy

Time-honoured literature in the social sciences suggests that membership control over union policy is undesirable due to its potentially adverse effects on third parties and/or society as a whole. Since the choices of unions have significant potential externalities (think, for example, of choices concerning wage increases and their impact on overall inflation and unemployment rates), society's interest in 'responsible' unionism – where responsible means capable of 'responding to the interests of the members . . . dealing fairly with individuals and minorities within its ranks, and exhibiting a due regard for legitimate interests of those beyond its walls' (Bok and

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Dunlop, 1970: 86) is after all better served by endowing unions with energetic and dynamic leaders than by democratizing their internal structures. Union democracy, it has been argued, encourages a higher propensity to strike (Parnes, 1956), greater intransigence in bargaining (Wolfe, 1985; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 1995), and the emergence of particularistic organizations solely concerned with their sectional interests (Streeck, 1988).

In contrast with these views, this article first discusses in general terms and then illustrates empirically two scenarios in which the presence of democratic decision-making procedures (that is, procedures which both involve the rank-and-file workers and give them ultimate decision-making power) is not only compatible but even conducive to moderate and 'responsible' union behaviour while their absence leads to opposite outcomes.

### **Aggregative Mechanisms**

The absence of systematic mechanisms (like a vote) for determining the workers' preferences may alter the internal balance of power within trade unions in favour of factions pursuing more militant agendas. Suppose there are two factions in the union. One prefers a moderate bargaining policy, the other a more militant one. The moderate faction truly represents the majority of the workers but is not sure about it because its claim to 'representativeness' has not been validated through a worker vote. The more extreme faction organizes a protest movement against the moderate policies pursued by the other. Accusations of illegitimacy (for example, the claim that the other party does not truly represent the 'will of the working people') are themselves instrumental in making the collective mobilization possible (Snow et al., 1986; Moore, 1978). Workers with more intense preferences (a minority of the working population) participate in the protest, while the others (a majority) choose not to act on their preferences and stay at home. This collective mobilization, in turn, is perceived as itself a confirmation that the working population as a whole does not support bargaining moderation; this leads to a shift in union policy.

In this case, leaders misinterpret the preferences of (the majority of) workers because they base their choices on a subsample of the entire working population, namely those workers with more intense

preferences who participate in strikes (Pizzorno, 1978a; Lohmann, 1993). In a situation like this, adoption of a decision-making principle like majority rule serves to validate the 'representativeness' of moderate union leaders and the legitimacy of their bargaining policies. The mobilization potential associated with the claim to truly represent the workers' will is, therefore, dispelled. Also, adoption of majority rule levels out the different degrees of intensity in the members' preferences (Dahl, 1965). In other words, the vote of workers who are ready to engage in collective action counts as much as that of more quiescent workers in determining collective decisions.

### **Deliberative Mechanisms**

When deliberative mechanisms are at play, democratic procedures may lead to internalization of third parties' legitimate interests even when workers have more extreme preferences than their leaders. Democracy is, in fact, more than just aggregation of (pre-existing) preferences. It often shapes or changes preferences (Habermas, 1996; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Cohen, 1996; Bohman, 1996). Often times, workers do not have well-defined (let alone fixed) preferences about alternative policy options. They rely on their leaders to evaluate the alternatives they are faced with (especially when this evaluation requires expert, technical knowledge unavailable to rank-and-file members).

In cases in which the interests of leaders and members are at least implicitly compatible (that is, it is clear that workers and leaders want the same thing but, perhaps due to bounded rationality or imperfect information, are at odds with each other as to the means to reach it), the communicative processes associated with rank-and-file participation in decision-making give union leaders ample opportunities to influence their members' preferences by diffusing private information available to them or explaining complicated causal relationships between means and ends (Fearon, 1998).

There are other cases, however, in which this process of rational persuasion is much more difficult to accomplish, although not altogether impossible. These are situations in which workers have

reasons to suspect a potential conflict of interests between leaders and members. In such circumstances, the leaders' attempt at persuading their constituents that the policies they advocate are in the workers' best interests (or in conformity with moral values that the workers share) may be in vain. Members may discard these arguments, no matter how truthful they really are, as 'cheap talk' (Farrell and Rabin, 1996; Crawford and Sobel, 1982).

Where a potential conflict of interest is involved, leaders need to provide evidence that they are animated by a 'communicative' as opposed to 'strategic' intent — that their goal is *not* advancing their own self-interests by manipulating their constituents but rather reaching understanding on what is the best possible course of action for everybody (Habermas, 1984: especially pp. 273–337). Interestingly enough, this claim to sincerity of communication — a claim whose validation is a precondition for communication to be informative at all — is often impossible to redeem through argument only, because every argument can be suspected of strategic misrepresentation. To prove that their motives are pure, union leaders need to go outside discourse and demonstrate that they do not stand to gain anything (in material terms) from the collective actions they advocate. If they are able to provide such evidence, they stand a good chance of being able to change their members' preferences.

The remainder of this article illustrates these stylized scenarios with evidence drawn from the Italian labour movement. Debates about union democracy represent a long-standing, recurrent feature of Italian industrial relations. Beginning with Gramsci (1921a, 1921b, 1921c), the historic militancy and radicalism of Italian unions have often been linked with their internally democratic organization. Even now that Italian unions seem to have firmly embraced the cause of cooperation with the other 'social partners', democratic procedures within trade unions are still frequently associated in the Italian political debate with irresponsible wage demands and rank-and-file unrest.<sup>1</sup> Yet, if one took a closer look at the Italian unions, one would notice that in the period when they were animated by radical, transformative intent, they were not so internally democratic after all (at least in the sense of abiding by the basic democratic principle 'one head, one vote'), and that their recent strategic transformation has been facilitated, *not* hindered, by organizational reforms that increased the weight of rank-and-file workers in organizational decision-making.<sup>2</sup>

## How Desirable is Union Democracy? The Received Wisdom

### *The American Industrial Relations Literature*

Until a few years ago, there was an established line of research on union democracy (or, in general, governance mechanisms within trade unions). This research stream reached a peak in the 1950s and 1960s and then declined. Although this line of research is now virtually extinct – probably due to the decline of unions in the Anglo-Saxon countries – its findings are still quite important and their relevance extends not just to unions but to other secondary associations as well.

Most studies, beginning with Lipset et al.'s (1956) seminal *Union Democracy*, investigated under what conditions democratic procedures could be sustained over time. It appeared, in fact, that in a world dominated by the 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michels, 1959), democratic governance could only survive in a few, 'deviant' cases like the International Typographical Union (ITU), in which the presence of a cohesive and segregated 'occupational community' promoted an unusually high degree of rank-and-file involvement and participation in union affairs – a condition that, as the authors themselves were quick to acknowledge, '[could] not be met most of the time in most unions or other voluntary groups' (Lipset et al., 1956: 403).

This literature on union democracy did not explicitly address the relationship between the unions' internal organization and their collective choices and behaviour. When it did (usually in passing), it assumed that internal democracy was undesirable for society as a whole. Pushed by the rules of electoral competition, union officials would second the short-term, myopic demands of their members even when these demands were in conflict with long-term organizational interests, the legitimate rights of minorities and broader societal interests. Lipset himself acknowledged this point:

Institutionalized [organizational] democracy is not a necessary condition for democracy in larger society, and *may in fact at times even weaken the democratic process of civil society*. The various secondary associations independent of the state which Tocqueville saw as necessary conditions of a democratic nation have been in both his day and ours largely one-party oligarchies. . . . *An organization under direct membership control may become irresponsible from either the vantage point of its needs or those of the society*. The members may want their 'selfish' objectives pursued even if achieving them will hurt others or endanger the organization.

Employers know well that the more democratic a union—that is, the more opposition in it to the incumbent leadership, the more factions, the more turnover in office—the more *irresponsible* the union will be. . . . It is noteworthy that the conditions which seem most plausibly related to membership participation and hence to internal democracy in trade unions and other voluntary associations . . . are the same conditions which *seemingly weaken democracy within the larger society*. (Lipset, 1962: 431 2; emphasis added)

Various American industrial relations scholars developed this supposed incompatibility between internal democracy and the public interest even further. Bok and Dunlop (1970), for example, reviewed the record of the ITU, allegedly the most democratic of the American unions, in light of its bargaining behaviour, and argued that democratic procedures had led this union to tramp on minority rights and assume a dubious stance vis-a-vis other groups outside their traditional boundaries. For example, they noted that:

Neither party in the union advocated work-sharing, wage cuts, or other steps to assist unemployed members during the 1930s, since each concluded that the political advantage to be won from jobless constituents would be more than offset by opposition from the much larger group of employed members. During the same period, a minority of members employed as mailers received so little recognition for their special interests that they eventually seceded and formed a separate organization. (Bok and Dunlop, 1970: 86)

In a similar tone, Walton and McKersic (1991: 287, citing Parnes, 1956) argued that union leaders tended to be more moderate than the rank-and-file workers:

In the majority of cases the rank-and-file is often more, rather than less, 'extreme' than the leadership in pressing for contract demands. . . . The problem is less often one of arousing the membership and convincing them of the righteousness of the demands, than it is one of restraining the rank-and-file from pressing for terms which the leaders' wider experience and greater knowledge tell them are either unwise or indefensible.

To be effective, as Jack Barbash (1967: 129) remarked,

. . . these union leaders should be as remote as possible from the grassroots level because the closer the union leadership is to the job, the more the leadership reflects rank-and-file concerns with the minute details of job shifts and job conditions, and the less it appreciates the economics of the enterprise which make changes necessary.

*The European Neo-Corporatist Literature*

The European neo-corporatist literature of the 1970s and 1980s reiterated and even radicalized these themes. Neo-corporatism was faced with the spectacular labour mobilizations of the late 1960s to early 1970s and the emergence of stagflation. To increase the governability of advanced industrialized countries, neo-corporatist scholars looked at the European corporatist societies of the 1920s and 1930s as a source of inspiration and advice. In these societies, interests were not allowed to organize freely. They were channelled, instead, into functionally differentiated, compulsory organizations – true and proper administrative branches of the state – in which a (forced) synthesis of the inevitable heterogeneity of societal interests was accomplished. This synthesis was preliminary and complementary to the ‘supreme synthesis’, which remained the prerogative (and the duty) of the state (see Hegel, 1991, especially the paragraphs on civil society, pp. 182–256).

The leading idea of neo-corporatist theory was essentially that it was possible even for the non-authoritarian regimes of the postwar period to replicate certain traits of the old corporatist systems without blatant infringements of liberal rights and liberties – except, perhaps, freedom of association (Schmitter, 1979, 1983). This required, however, the active intervention of the state in shaping the associational environment. In fact, the state selected from the universe of groups those most representative and then helped the leaders of these organizations ‘lock-in’ their members through measures like legal recognition, compulsory membership, automatic collection of dues and direct access to public funds (see Offe, 1981). This hierarchical and internally non-democratic structure was absolutely essential. Neo-corporatists shared, in fact, with American industrial relations scholars, and, in general, with theorists of the ‘elite theory of democracy’ (see Schumpeter, 1950: 260–1), a general distrust of members and a parallel appreciation for the responsibility and clairvoyance of unions leaders (see Streeck, 1982). Neo-corporatist theory assumed, in fact, that left on their own and in the absence of material incentives or coercion, group members would establish a plurality of small, narrow-minded organizations engaged in a systematic spoliation of public resources (Tarantelli, 1986; Crouch, 1985). It did not even consider the possibility that union leaders could generate consensus through persuasion and rational argument.<sup>3</sup>

Among neo-corporatist theorists, Wolfgang Streeck perhaps best articulated the inescapable tradeoff between efficiency and (organizational) democracy and the consequent need for oligarchic labour organizations:

There can be no doubt that corporatists were willing, in the name of a general interest of collectively acting groups being discovered and effectively pursued, to accept barriers of access to political markets, compulsory or semi-compulsory membership, and internal discipline. *'Too much' democracy* or, if one wanted to fudge the issue, the *'wrong kind' of democracy* was shown to be detrimental to the collective interest. (Streeck, 1988: 312-13; emphasis mine)

Although in neo- or liberal corporatist systems non-entry or exit was normally (but not always) easier than in authoritarian corporatism, the difference was in no way categorical in this respect – not to be a union member in Sweden is far from simple. And although the internal life of the quasi-sovereign associations of the neo-, liberal, or democratic corporatism certainly allowed for more *voice* than the Italian corporations under Mussolini, the literature on associations has shown time and again that in democratically-organized interest associations things not always and necessarily proceed democratically. What is liberal about liberal corporatism, and possibly about liberal democracy in general, is, therefore, essentially freedom of entry and exit, *not of individuals vis-a-vis their associations, but rather of associations vis-a-vis state policies and attempts at implementing social concertation. With regard to the difference between authoritarianism and democracy, freedom of collective action vis-a-vis the state appears more important than freedom of the individuals who participate in collective action vis-a-vis their associations.* (Streeck, 1994: 11; emphasis and translation mine)

Most of the neo-corporatist literature solely focused on the *vertical* relationship between union leaders and members. Yet, as it was remarked by some early critics (e.g. Sabel, 1981), union organizations are not monolithic, and *horizontal* clashes of different groups of union leaders carrying competing conceptions of what is best for the workers are often as important (if not more) in explaining the choice of particular bargaining strategies. These groups fight internal battles that ultimately shape the unions' collective choices. The legitimacy of union leaders and the perceived fairness of decision-making procedures are often key in determining the outcome of these internal battles. By reconstructing the trajectory of centralized bargaining agreements in Italy, the next section illustrates this point.

## The Italian Unions and Centralized Bargaining<sup>4</sup>

### *Centralized Bargaining in Italy: The Early Phase*

Beginning with the late 1970s, essentially there were two union factions fighting each other in Italy. They had fundamentally different visions of what a union is and what it should do. One believed that the unions should act as agents of social and political dissent; the other that they should be partners in the process of economic change. The former faction included those sections of the Italian labour movement that had been most active during the mobilizations of 1968–72, that is the metalworker federations and the factory councils of some of Italy's largest industrial plants (Golden, 1988; Mershon, 1986; Pizzorno, 1978b). The latter rotated around the national union confederations.

The internal battle between these two opposing factions was not directly shaped by their respective sizes or the amount of organizational resources they controlled. In fact, thanks to its superior mobilization capacity, the more radical faction exercised for many years a thorough-going hegemony over the rest of the Italian labour movement even though it was unclear whether it truly represented the attitudes of the majority of the Italian workers. In 1981, when they were close to their peak, the metalworking federations had slightly above 1 million members. They represented 11.6 percent of the total union membership (Romagnoli, 1982: 177). Even assuming that all factory councils shared a militant approach to collective bargaining—which is clearly not true for those in particular industrial sectors like textile/apparel as well as those in the service, public and transportation sectors—there were in the late 1970s 32,000 of these councils. They represented 5.5 million workers (Regalia, 1982: 217). In the same period, the number of workers in Italy was 20 million.

These two union factions came head to head in the late 1970s to early 1980s, when the Italian labour movement drastically changed its bargaining strategy and began to engage in a series of centralized pacts aimed at moderating nominal wage growth (Golden, 1988). In 1983, a tripartite agreement between government, business and labour cut wage indexation, imposed a series of 'wage ceilings' on sectoral collective bargaining and banned plant-level negotiations for 18 months. This pact was preceded (and perhaps made more legitimate) by a large-scale consultation of the rank-and-file workers

in which 69 percent of the 4.1 million workers consulted approved the confederal unions' policy (Speranza, 1984: 485-6). In 1984, the government proposed a new tripartite pact against inflation. This time, however, the three union confederations split on the proposed agreement. Because the CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro), Italy's largest confederation, refused to sign the agreement, the government (which could count on the support of the other two labour confederations and Italy's main private employer association, Confindustria) implemented its policy proposal through an executive order.

The CGIL was itself under attack by some internal groups. In fact, while the confederations were still negotiating in Rome, some of the factory councils in northern Italy initiated the so-called '*autoconvocati*' (meaning 'self-summoned') movement. The denomination of the movement signalled that this mobilization did not take place under the aegis of the official unions. Four major industrial cities were especially prominent in the *autoconvocati* movement: Brescia, Milan, Turin and Genoa. The south was almost entirely absent from this mobilization (Vento, 1986).

Procedural demands for more union democracy figured prominently in the *autoconvocati* movement. The *autoconvocati* argued that the policy of wage restraint adopted by the confederal unions did not really represent the preferences of the 'working class'. It only reflected the self-serving goals of union bureaucrats interested in increasing their influence and visibility at the national level. To buttress their claims, the dissidents pointed to the hundreds of thousands of workers they were able to enlist in demonstrations and strikes against the confederal unions' bargaining policy. In the end, the *autoconvocati* gained the support of the Communist Party (PCI) and, to a lesser extent, of the CGIL as well. The PCI promoted a national referendum so that all citizens could express their views on the government's decree.<sup>5</sup>

Besides drastically changing the scenario of Italian industrial relations following the referendum, tripartite collective bargaining disappeared for the rest of the 1980s—the (dis)agreement of 1984 also spurred a lively debate over the need to restore union democracy in Italy. This debate was as much a political debate about union *strategy* as it was a debate about the appropriate decision-making *methods*. A sizeable proportion of union leaders, particularly (but not exclusively) within the CGIL, disliked the

accommodating, cooperative strategy the confederal unions had adopted since the late 1970s. With an impeccable Michelsian (and neo-corporatist logic), these leaders argued that only non-democratic workers' organizations could engage in voluntary wage restraint. By engaging in voluntary wage restraint, in fact, the unions betrayed their institutional role of representing the workers' interests and substituted to it the goal of promoting the personal interests of union leaders (Bertinotti, 1991; Cremaschi, 1993).

In response to these internal attacks, the union confederations engaged in a series of organizational innovations aimed at increasing internal democracy. These innovations included the electoral renewal of workplace representatives, the weakening of legal/institutional privileges enjoyed by the established union confederations on the basis of their presumed (that is, non-verified electorally) 'representativeness' and, most important, the institutionalization of worker referenda on all major collective bargaining agreements. These organizational innovations changed the internal politics of the Italian labour movement. In contrast with what the more militant faction perhaps expected, however, they ultimately strengthened, not weakened, the confederal leadership. The 1993 incomes policy agreements and the 1995 accord on pension reform illustrate how this happened.

### *Centralized Bargaining in the 1990s*

On 31 July 1992, the confederal unions signed with Confindustria and the government a new tripartite accord that, among other things, abolished wage indexation and banned plant-level bargaining for one year. This accord stirred deep internal turmoil and the Italian union confederations went very close to replicating in 1992 their previous 1984 split. Similar to 1984, in fact, the majority of the CGIL initially opposed the accord. Similar to 1984, protesters focused their complaints less on the content of the agreement (which of course they rejected) than on the decision-making process. Just like in 1984, in fact, the union leaders had failed to consult the workers prior to signing the agreement.

The leader of the internal faction, Essere Sindacato, clearly articulated why the agreement was both substantially wrong and (most important) procedurally illegitimate:

It has been subtracted to the workers, *without their mandate*, a right and a power: these have to be given back to them. In any case, workers have to be offered at least the possibility of declaring their opinion, in a manner that is binding for the union, on an accord that has such consequences for them. The decision whether or not to do a democratic consultation among all workers on the accord of end-July is, at this point, an issue that touches on the democratic organization of the country. . . . If it is not done, it will be a disaster, an abrupt acceleration of the union's tendency to cut its ties with the workers and become state. (*Il Manifesto*, 12 August 1992: 1 and 7)

Another leader of the internal *fronde* expressed in another newspaper article his certainty that if consulted, the workers would reject the centralized agreement:

It is necessary that the CGIL's signature be withdrawn from the agreement. . . . A mass consultation, *whose result can be taken for granted*, is both useful and necessary to organize the fight for changing the accord and launch a massive campaign of plant bargaining. (*Il Manifesto*, 23 August 1992: 7; emphasis added)

Protest against the July 1992 accord spread quickly. Bruno Trentin, the leader of the CGIL, was attacked by demonstrators in Florence; other union leaders were also violently confronted in other northern cities. These protests soon led to the renaissance of the *autoconvocati* movement in various northern factories. Once again, many of *autoconvocati*'s demands were purely procedural: their primary goal was contributing to a democratic refoundation of the Italian union movement — a refoundation which included the workers' right to regularly elect their plant representatives and to approve/reject both bargaining platforms and agreements through referenda. As in 1984, the *autoconvocati* were quite successful in capturing political attention and influencing the strategic posture of particularly the CGIL. Following the first grassroots mobilizations, in fact, the CGIL decided to officially support the *autoconvocati*, thus creating frictions with the other union confederations. Most important, the CGIL decided to support one of the *autoconvocati*'s key demands — that the ban on plant-level collective bargaining included in the July 1992 accord was to be declared invalid. Hence, some local unions (especially in the Brescia and Milan areas) managed to break the block on plant-collective bargaining and forced management to sign plant-level collective bargaining agreements. The mobilization of the *autoconvocati* continued until the spring of 1993. In the meantime, the union

confederations proceeded with their negotiations with management and government at the national level. After a long and often complicated bargaining process, the parties reached a new agreement in July 1993 – an agreement that confirmed the abolition of wage indexation and institutionalized the unions' participation in macro-economic policy at the national level.

For the first time in the history of the Italian labour movement, the July 1993 tripartite accord was followed by a binding referendum among the workers. In fact, although the tentative agreement between government, employers and union leaders was reached on 3 July 1993, the actual agreement was only signed on 23 July 1993. In the intervening 20 days, the confederal unions set up approximately 30,000 assemblies in all major plants and offices throughout the country (CGIL, 1993). About 1.5 million workers participated in the vote and 68 percent of them approved the deal. The referendum proved to be a powerful legitimating device for the union confederal leadership. Only three sectors out of 50 (automotive, air transportation and universities) rejected the incomes policy accord (CGIL, 1993). The percentage of favourable votes was generally higher in the south than in the north. In the metal-working sector, support for incomes policies was, not surprisingly, much lower than the national average (58.9 percent vs 67.9 percent). However, while only 47.9 percent of the metalworkers approved the July 1993 accord in Lombardy, 79.7 percent of the metalworkers approved it in Calabria.

The consultation confirmed the existence of several, often large pockets of dissent. The employees of some historical automotive plants like Alfa Aresé near Milan, Fiat Mirafiori in Turin, or OM Iveco in Brescia voted (sometimes overwhelmingly) against the accord. Two of the strongholds of the *autoconvocati* movement, the cities of Milan and Brescia, rejected the accord as well (CGIL, 1993). In Milan, not only did industrial workers vote against the incomes policy agreement, but the white-collar employees of the Milanese City Hall and of the Palace of Justice also.

This time, however, the *autoconvocati* did not mobilize: not because they liked the agreement – the Essere Sindacato faction within the CGIL, for example, declared well before the conclusion of the negotiation that the forthcoming compromise looked 'awful' and that 'it would be a mistake to reach an agreement' (*Il Sole-24 Ore*, 18 June 1993). The CGIL Labour Chamber in Brescia

publicly expressed its opposition to the July 1993 agreement, and promised 'a new Hot Autumn' (*Il Manifesto*, 10 July 1992). They did not mobilize, I argue, because of the peculiar mix of wage restraint and union democracy that was delivered to them with the 1993 accord. This agreement contained, in fact, two important responses to the 'methodological' criticisms previously raised by the autoconvocati movement and other dissident union factions: first, it included as one of its constituting parts an organizational reform that institutionalized the regular re-election of plant representatives. Second, it was accompanied by the promise of a binding consultation among the workers. Although they clearly disagreed on the content of the agreement, the dissident groups within the Italian labour movement concentrated their energies *not* on the organization of grassroots protest but rather on trying to persuade the workers in the assemblies.

Some of these groups had in the end something to say about the process – a few, for example, complained that 'in the assemblies, only union leaders who were in favour of the agreement [were] allowed to speak' (*Il Sole-24 Ore*, 23 July 1993). Yet none contested the outcome of the consultation, namely that the majority of Italian workers had clearly expressed themselves in favour of the July 1993 agreement on incomes policies.

Following approval of the July 1993 incomes policies accord, the Italian confederal unions continued to rely on worker consultations to legitimize their (moderate) bargaining policies. In 1995, they negotiated with government a pension reform that introduced stricter eligibility rules and less generous criteria for the determination of pension benefits. Pension reform was even more fiercely contested by northern industrial workers than incomes policies had been. That of (particularly middle-aged) industrial workers was, in fact, a critical constituency for the Italian confederal unions. Many of these workers had participated in the 'Hot Autumn' wave of strikes. Now they were finally approaching (early) retirement and were ready to mobilize against any attempt at cutting their future pension benefits.

The confederal unions organized a massive wave of assemblies (approximately 42,000) in all major plants and offices followed by a secret ballot referendum. The number of workers participating in this vote amounted to 4.5 million and 64 percent of them approved the reform. Retired workers voted overwhelmingly in

favour of the accord (91 percent). This is hardly a surprise since the reform affected benefits for future retirees only. Active workers approved the reform as well, although with a lower percentage (58 percent). The majority of workers in Lombardy and in other industrial areas voted against. On a national basis, two important union federations, the metalworkers and the school teachers, turned down the accord.

The introduction of worker consultations empowered a series of worker groups (like public/service sector workers and workers in small firms) that did not share the militant bargaining style of the metalworkers and other industrial elites and favoured instead compromise and moderation. Previously, systematic mechanisms aimed at determining the workers' preferences had been missing. An imperfect proxy like workers' participation in strikes had influenced union choices. Hence, groups capable of mobilizing large numbers of workers had been able to shape the unions' agenda (Pizzorno, 1978a). With electoral mechanisms in place, however, workers with very intense preferences, and ready to mobilize in support of their demands, found themselves having exactly the same impact on collective decisions as other, more quiescent workers.

Besides aggregating preferences, democratic decision-making procedures perhaps also shaped preferences. In both 1993 and 1995, in fact, union leaders did not just ask workers to vote but spent a considerable amount of time and resources *before the vote* setting up assemblies and trying to persuade the workers. Some dissenting groups complained that they had not been allowed sufficient space to articulate their reasons in the assemblies. Clearly, there was a diffuse perception that the process of debate preceding the vote mattered (see Baccaro [1999: Ch. 4] for more on this).

The next section seeks to analyze systematically the effects of aggregative vs deliberative decision-making procedures by comparing events in two matched-paired Fiat factories, Termoli and Modugno, both located in southern Italy. Workers in these two plants were faced with exactly the same collective dilemma yet dealt with it in different ways: in Termoli, aggregative procedures were used (that is, workers voted on alternative options), while in Modugno, aggregation was preceded by deliberation (that is, the vote was preceded by extensive public debate). We see here what difference this makes for collective outcomes.

## Flexibility vs Jobs: The Cases of Modugno and Termoli<sup>6</sup>

### *Background*

Established in the early 1970s, the Termoli and Modugno factories manufactured auto components (engines and transmissions in the case of Termoli, fuel-injectors in the case of Modugno). With 2750 employees vs 650, Termoli was bigger than Modugno.<sup>7</sup> Apart from their different sizes, these two plants shared the same ownership and management (Fiat), same unions, similar technologies and work organization and similar composition of the workforce (predominantly blue-collar). Also, they were embedded in very similar socioeconomic environments. At the end of 1994, the employees of these two factories were faced with the same social dilemma: they could vote either for or against a particular collective bargaining agreement that traded new investments and jobs in exchange for a more flexible organization of working-time based on six as opposed to five days per week.

Confronted with an unexpected surge in demand, Fiat had, in fact, proposed a new organization of working-time that extended the number of weekly shifts from 15 to 18 while leaving the total number of hours per person unchanged. With the new schedule, Saturday would become a regular working day. Workers, however, would have a sliding day off (Monday, Tuesday and so on) in the course of the week. In exchange, Fiat promised to introduce new, innovative production lines in both the Termoli and Modugno factories.

The *quid pro quo* was clear. On the one hand, the two proposed collective agreements forced existing employees to work on Saturdays at standard hourly rates and limited their capacity to work at premium overtime rates during the weekends. On the other hand, the agreements introduced new, state-of-the-art investments and, hence, improved the workers' prospect for improved job security. Perhaps more importantly, these agreements created new jobs (409 in Termoli and 170 in Modugno – 90 of which on fixed-term contracts) in areas characterized by endemically high unemployment rates, especially among the youth. To strengthen its bargaining position, in both cases the company threatened to move the investments elsewhere, in one of its other factories around the world, in case the unions refused its proposal.

In both factories, the unions reached a tentative agreement with management and the workers were asked to vote on this tentative agreement. While 60 percent of the Modugno employees voted in favour of the agreement, 64 percent of the Termoli employees voted against. Yet, in both Termoli *and* Modugno there had initially been considerable worker resistance to the flexibility agreement resistance strictly linked to the widespread diffusion of overtime in these two factories. Also, the two agreements were very similar in content. In both cases the company had refused to compensate the workers with significant wage increases.

### *Differences in Decision-Making Processes*

The decision-making process was very different in the Termoli and Modugno plants and this explains, I argue, the difference in outcome. Although union leaders in Termoli were themselves convinced that flexibility was necessary, they failed to involve the workers in the decision-making process. For example, they never organized either general or department-specific assemblies. Consequently, the Termoli employees never had a chance to publicly debate (and hence, ponder) the consequences of alternative collective choices or even consider the seriousness of Fiat's threat of relocation. They were only called in at the last moment for a final 'ordeal', that is the referendum, which registered their ill-considered preferences.

Due to lack of transparency and information, many workers in Termoli got the wrong idea about the negotiations in process. Many thought that their regular working week would become 48 as opposed to 40 hours long as a result of the agreement. Still others thought that they were going to lose their 'shift allowance' (*indennità di turno*) an important component of worker pay. Many were not even aware of Fiat's threat of relocation. Among those who were, few seemed to believe that Fiat would seriously enforce it. After all, Termoli was one of the most automated and efficient engine plants in the world. Of course Fiat would want to invest there! These people probably ignored the fact that Fiat had not hesitated to shut down other plants when unions and workers had shown signs of standing in the way of industrial restructuring.

Internal union processes were much more participatory in Modugno. Here, union leaders took a clear, public stance in favour

of the agreement by arguing that working-time reform was not only ethically right (since it created job opportunities for previously excluded categories), but also expedient because it increased the likelihood that the present employees would keep their jobs in the future. The process of internal discussion lasted three months – a period in which local unionists held at least one general assembly every week, often supplemented by department-specific assemblies.

In the course of this process of internal deliberation, union leaders used a combination of ethical and pragmatic discourse to persuade their constituents (Habermas, 1993). They sought to show that acceptance of the new working-time schedule was justified by both adherence to the ethical value of solidarity and pursuit of the workers' 'best' (i.e. long-term) interests. One of the arguments that resonated most often in these assemblies had to do with plant survival. Union representatives argued that only a factory that was capable of attracting new, state-of-the-art investment had reasonable prospects of survival in the long term. Given the rapid obsolescence of technology in the auto component industry, lack of investment meant slow but sure death. Another argument touched on the workers' identities as parents. Union representatives argued that the Modugno workers could not afford to miss such a golden opportunity since so many of their children at home were unemployed. This argument had a deep impact on the workers. Workers demanded, however, that in exchange for their 'sacrifices' their children be favoured in the hiring process – something that the Modugno management, just like their colleagues at Termoli, was willing to grant.

Why did union leaders in Termoli not act just like their colleagues in Modugno? Why did they not organize assemblies or use principled argument to persuade the workers? Why was there 'deliberation' in Modugno and simple 'aggregation' of preferences in Termoli? The answer lies, I argue, in the implicit rules regulating public deliberation and in the constraints that these rules impose on particularly the moral credibility of speakers.

### *'Strategic' vs 'Communicative' Action*

People engaging in deliberation exchange arguments for either 'communicative' or 'strategic' purposes (Habermas, 1984). In other words, they can be genuinely convinced that what they propose

is best for everybody (and be ready to change their mind in case better arguments are advanced) or they can have a hidden agenda and use arguments to advance their own self-interests. For strategic manipulation to be possible at all, one has to assume that at least some people in a deliberative assembly are motivated by wider reasons and not just self-interest (Habermas, 1984). In fact, if everybody were motivated by pure self-interest (and this were common knowledge), people would simply refrain from using principled arguments or even discussing issues at all since this would have no consequences for individual choices. It is entirely possible (and perhaps even probable), however, that in real as opposed to ideal debates people pursuing strategic goals might try to present themselves as animated by communicative intents to increase their persuasiveness (Elster, 1994, 1995).

According to Habermas's theory, a person engaging in communicative action implicitly declares themselves ready to redeem three validity claims: (1) a claim to propositional truth of the argument; (2) a claim to normative validity; and (3) a claim to sincerity of communication.<sup>8</sup> 'Redeeming validity claims' means that the speaker is prepared to offer reasons in support of their claims in case she or he is asked to do so. If the hearer accepts the validity claims proposed to them (that is, does not challenge them with counter-arguments), this means she or he has recognized the truth, rightness and sincerity of those claims and is ready to be *motivated* by them, or, in other words, ready to coordinate their actions with those of the speaker. In debates like the ones taking place in Modugno, however (and, I would surmise, in most real debates), being able to redeem the first two types of validity claims does not necessarily imply being able to motivate others. The hearer still cannot tell whether the speaker has the hearer's best interests at heart or is using knowledge and information selectively to deceive them. Therefore, she or he might simply ignore the speaker's speech acts as 'cheap talk' (Farrell and Rabin, 1996).

The Modugno leaders argued that it was in the workers' best interests to vote in favour of the flexibility agreement because otherwise Fiat would stop investing in the plant and, sooner or later, their own jobs would be at risk. Implicit in this pragmatic argument was a fairly complicated probabilistic model of what the company would do in case of rejection (and how other events would unfold in the future). Surely this argument could be critically appraised based on past experience and/or factual evidence (although I doubt that

the controversy could be unambiguously resolved). However, workers with limited knowledge and also limited time to gather independent information might be unable to critically assess these claims. In other words, workers would have no clear way of finding out whether leaders were making things up or expressing probabilistically accurate forecasts they had better take into account. Lacking independent criteria of validation, they might just as well ignore the leaders' claims.

The Modugno leaders also argued that voting in favour of the flexibility agreement was ethically appropriate because it created new job opportunities for the area's unemployed youth, including the workers' own children. However, the choice to vote against the agreement could also be constructed as ethically appropriate (i.e. generalizable). For example, one could argue (and some workers did argue) that it reflected the need for workers to stand up to management's requests and perhaps also the need to counter management's attempt at pitting employed and unemployed against one another. I do not think there was a clear way of deciding which of these two arguments was more ethically appropriate.

The litmus test for the Modugno union leaders was their claim to sincerity of communication that they were not pursuing some hidden, self-interested agenda. In both Termoli and Modugno, rumours of corruption and malfeasance had spread quickly. In Termoli, union leaders were accused of having received bribes from Fiat to 'ease' implementation of the new working-time schedule; in Modugno, of having secretly negotiated with Fiat a secret pact that exchanged union complacency with the privileged hiring of the unionists' children, relatives and/or friends. For pragmatic and ethical arguments to be informative at all, union leaders needed to redeem their claim to sincerity of communication. This claim, however, cannot be redeemed through argument only (since every argument can be suspected of strategic misrepresentation).<sup>9</sup> It requires consistency between words and acts. The employees of Modugno explicitly asked for such 'proofs of consistency'.

For example, in the course of discussions over the need to 'sacrifice' Saturday, many workers said publicly to the plant delegates: 'We'll see whether we'll really see *you* here on Saturdays' (interview with a plant representative). Due to special medical or family conditions, in fact, some employees can be exempted from the most physically taxing shifts. Thanks to their familiarity with management, plant delegates sometimes fake it and obtain exemption. As

a result of this public challenge, all of the union delegates in the Modugno plant, except those with serious problems, rotated on six days per week just like regular employees. In another case, the union leaders themselves felt the need to send a clear signal to the workers that they did not stand to gain anything from the proposed working-time rearrangement. Plant delegates of the FIOM-CGIL, the majority union, set up a meeting and openly discussed the issue of hiring family members. With 'death in their hearts' (interview with a plant representative) since many of them had unemployed children, they decided that their family members would not send in applications.

On this issue of moral credibility, the local union leaderships of the Termoli and Modugno plants diverged considerably. Local unions in Termoli were, as one of my interviewees self-critically put it, the 'unions of petty favours' (*sindacato delle ambasciatelle*). It was as if each unionist had a cohort of *clientes* behind them and perceived their role as one of intermediation between these individual workers and plant management. Most of the Termoli delegates did not rotate on shifts. They should, but thanks to management acquiescence, they had all come up with different justifications/excuses (medical conditions, family problems and so on) and got exemption. These people lacked the moral legitimation needed to demand sacrifices from the workers in the name of solidarity with the unemployed. They knew that the workers' likely response would have been that those who always made the sacrifices were the workers, while union leaders always managed to get off the hook. This probably explains why they refrained from organizing assemblies and simply asked workers to vote on the proposed agreements.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The two case studies presented in this article show the following. First, when electoral procedures are absent, minority factions pursuing militant/radical agendas may be advantaged. Vice versa, implementation of moderate bargaining policies becomes easier, as demonstrated by the 1993 incomes policy accord and the 1995 pension reform, when these policies are accompanied by worker referenda. The sheer counting of votes delegitimizes dissenting groups claiming to represent the true will of the working people.

Also, due to the intrinsic characteristics of majority rule, the preferences of workers ready to mobilize count as much as those of more apathetic workers in determining the outcome. Second, full rank-and-file control over union policies does not necessarily lead to 'extreme' outcomes, even in cases in which workers seem to have systematically more extreme preferences than their leaders. Leaders can persuade workers that outcomes that internalize the 'systemic' effects of union action are either in the workers' best interests or in line with collectively shared ethical values. As shown by the Termoli/Modugno comparison, this process of persuasion imposes, however, stringent requirements on particularly the moral credibility of leaders.

Do procedures in which workers have ultimate decision-making power always lead to moderate and responsible bargaining strategies? No, not always. If, as American industrial relations theory and neo-corporatist theory implicitly assumed, workers are really more shortsighted or unreasonable than their leaders, decision-making procedures that empower them can obviously generate undesirable socioeconomic consequences. Whether it is true that leaders are more inclined to compromise than their constituents is, however (especially at the intermediate and/or local levels), an empirical question to be decided case by case. The opposite view—that reasonable trade union members are held captive by their politicized, conflict-prone leaders—is often entertained by politicians, if not scholars (see Undy and Martin, 1984; Undy et al., 1996). Be that as it may, the evidence presented in this article shows that even moderate leaders can be induced to alter their bargaining strategies when the internal opposition can credibly claim that their choices do not represent the 'will of the working people' and that democratic decision-making procedures not only do not necessarily reduce leadership control over the membership but may actually increase it—a different kind of control, exercised through rational persuasion (or 'ideological domination', as Przeworski [1998] would put it) rather than outright imposition, but nonetheless, no less effective than the latter.

American industrial relations scholars and European neo-corporatist theorists pointed to a real problem when they warned that democratic governance within trade unions and other secondary associations might lead to undesirable consequences: What should society do when, like in Termoli, the collective decisions of group members have important consequences for third parties and

yet these third parties are not represented in the democratic process? In the case of Termoli, for example, Fiat received 6700 applications in few days for 409 blue-collar jobs. Some of these applications were from college graduates living 200 miles away – a clear sign, I think, that several people were willing to accept the working conditions that the Termoli employees refused. Yet, the Termoli employees democratically voted and decided to turn their back on those people and jobs. Can something be done to avoid a conflict between the choices of internally democratic partial societies and the legitimate interests and rights of outsiders?

The answer that American industrial relations scholars and European neo-corporatists gave to this question – limit the democratic process and empower responsible leaders – is, I think, of the wrong kind. Organizational oligarchy is not only difficult to sustain (at least in formally democratic societies), it also tends to generate a host of unpleasant consequences like corruption and even gangsterism, as illustrated by the history of some American unions (e.g. the Teamsters). Finally, it is not true, as argued in this article, that democratic associations are systematically more militant and/or shortsighted than oligarchic ones.

Perhaps the cure to the ills of democracy is more democracy, intended not just as voting but as deliberation, not just *within* but also *across* associations (Cohen and Rogers, 1994; Mansbridge, 1992). In some cases, like Modugno, deliberation within associations, initiated and sustained by union leaders, is sufficient for the organization to internalize the legitimate interests of outsiders. In other cases, however, deliberation within associations may not be enough. Participants in the deliberative process may lack the skills, the moral credibility (like at Termoli), or simply the desire to be attentive to the legitimate interests and rights of third parties. In similar circumstances, deliberation across associations may be helpful. We do not know what the choice of the Termoli workers could have been had they engaged in public discussion with representatives of the unemployed and the students prior to the vote. They could have voted differently. Even one voice can produce significant results in a deliberative assembly. The cure to 'partial societies' can perhaps be found in expanding, rather than restricting, the democratic process within secondary associations so that representatives of other affected parties have a chance to participate and express their views in the internal debate. This is a proposal that

policy-makers committed to the ideals of participatory democracy might want to consider.

## Notes

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1. The difficulties encountered by a recent legislative proposal aimed at institutionalizing worker elections and workplace referenda illustrate this last point.

2. The empirical research for this article is based on 149 field interviews between 1996 and 1999 as well as analysis of a variety of secondary sources (for example, union periodicals, national and local newspapers, internal union documents and collective bargaining agreements). The list of interviewees is available from the author upon request.

3. These observations were much more prescriptive than descriptive. In fact, few scholars were able to validate the views summarized earlier. Only in Germany did empirical research find a clear tendency of labour unions to evolve in the direction indicated by neo-corporatist theory (Streeck, 1982). In Norway, rank-and-file members seemed to have ample opportunities for influencing the choices of union leaders, including the right to ratify or reject collective bargaining agreements through binding referenda. Perhaps more importantly, these internal arrangements appeared to increase, not diminish, the legitimacy and stability of concertation (Lange, 1984). Even in Sweden, often referred to as the model of neo-corporatist policy-making, a detailed study of the internal process within LO, the blue-collar confederation, came to the conclusion that the relationship between union leaders and members was one of 'interactive democracy' (Lewin, 1980). In other words, union leaders educated their constituents through communication and pedagogy as to the advantages of policies (like the policy of egalitarian wages) that at first sight appeared to imply losses for workers.

4. This section draws on Baccaro (2000) and on the literature cited therein.

5. The results of the referendum were favourable to government and its allies within the union movement: 54.4 percent voted in favour of the government decree, 45.7 percent voted against. Interestingly enough, the number of votes against the decree was especially high in the south, a region left almost untouched by grassroots mobilization. Vice versa, it was surprisingly low in those areas of the country in which the *autoconvocati* had been most active. In Brescia, perhaps the capital of the *autoconvocati* movement, only 35.8 percent of the people voted against the decree (Agosta, 1987).

6. This section draws on Baccaro (forthcoming) and on the literature cited therein.

7. Modugno was formally part of Magneti Marelli, a fully owned subsidiary of Fiat.

8. The claim to sincerity of communication plays an ancillary role in Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action. Habermas seems to think that this claim is especially relevant in the realm of artistic expression (see, for example, Habermas, 1984: 85-6). This is probably a consequence of the fact that in building his theory, he assumes that people are motivated by communicative intents and then work out the consequences of this assumption. In real (as opposed to ideal) communication, I surmise, the speaker's claim to sincerity ('I really mean what I say') is the fundamental validity claim that allows the hearer to distinguish between communicative and strategic intents.

9. 'The sincerity of expressions cannot be *grounded* but only *shown*; insincerity can be *revealed* by the lack of consistency between an utterance and the past or future actions internally connected with it' (Habermas, 1984: 41).

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